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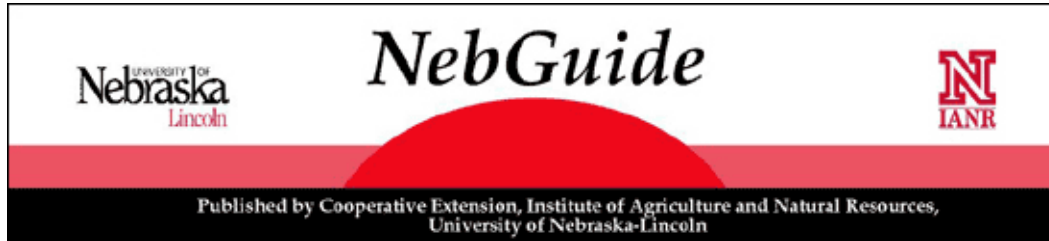


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Creating Sustainable Families

This NebGuide discusses strategies for strengthening interpersonal family relationships.

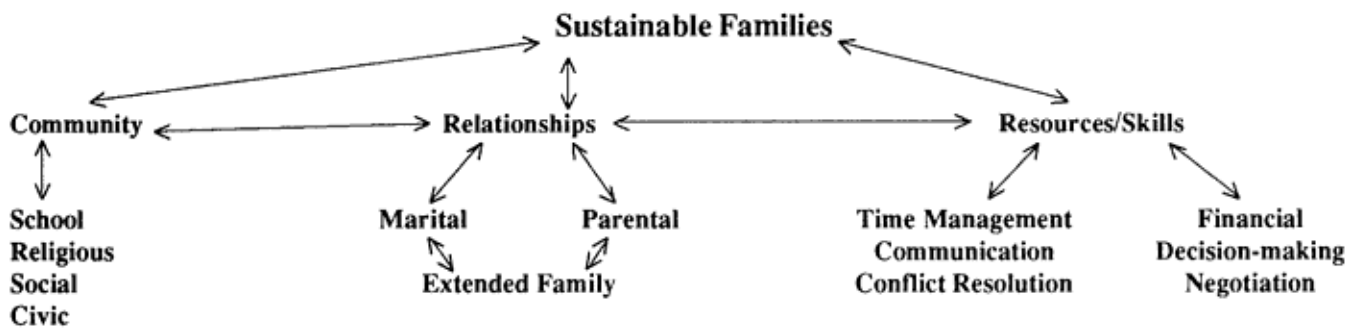
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As the 20th century draws to a close, there has been increasing concern about the family's ability to cope with the multiple stressors and demands placed upon it. Is the family still capable of providing a safe, nurturing, and wholesome place where children can grow up to become competent, productive adults? The current divorce rate claims one in two first marriages. Alcoholism among adults and youth is a major social and family problem. Reports of domestic violence and child abuse have increased 500 - 700 percent in the past 25 years. Juvenile crime and gang violence seem to have mushroomed. Vandalism, theft, and youth dropping out of school have increased dramatically. In two-parent households with children, 80 percent of the mothers work outside the home. Some researchers suggest one-third to one-half of children will live part of their childhood in a single-parent household. Regardless of structure, a family that sustains, supports, and nourishes its members across its life cycle seems imperative.

A sustainable family creates a safe, positive, and supportive environment allowing all family members to thrive and develop their fullest potential over the family life cycle. Sustainable families can efficiently access and utilize needed resources, including money, and can live together in a reasonably healthy manner. They effectively manage the many crises and opportunities thrust at them over the life cycle of the family. They avoid high-risk behaviors and situations (e.g. drug and alcohol abuse) and work to make a supportive and safe community environment. The adults in the family are good role models and "practice what they preach" by showing respect for and by caring about others. Sustainable families have the power to make their workplace and their community more "family friendly." They are resilient enough to cope with hardships and to bounce back from adversity. Sustainable families work together with neighbors, friends, and extended family to solve problems and meet the demands of unanticipated change, and assisting each other in times of hardship.

Sustainable families need skills and support in three major areas: **resources, relationships,** and a **sense of community**. The diagram below reveals the connectedness between these areas and several factors important in creating sustainable families. If a family has a deficit in one of these areas, the other two are impacted. Families must be empowered in ways that can be transferred to the next generation so they can build a better today -- and a better tomorrow.



Qualities of Strong, Sustainable Families

Olson and DeFrain (1994, p.564.) suggest four major systems in society to consider when describing successful families. The **social system** includes national, state, and community policies, laws, government programs, and traditions. The **belief system** includes family members' values, attitudes, behavior patterns, and expectations about parenting, relationships, management practices, and decision-making. The **extended family system** refers to the interaction between the family and its relatives, friends, and support networks. The **family system** includes three dimensions of healthy family functioning: (1) *family cohesion*, (2) *family flexibility*, and (3) *family communication* (Olson, et. al., 1989). In data gathered from more than 17,000 families in 28 countries including the United States, Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) identified six qualities of a strong family system, namely include: *spending time together, commitment, communication, appreciation and affection, the ability to cope with stress and crisis, and spiritual well-being*. The relationship between Olson's three family dimensions and Stinnett and DeFrain's six qualities of strong families are discussed below.

Family Cohesion

Family Cohesion is defined as a feeling of *emotional closeness* with another person. In families, it is an experience of being nurtured and loved. When cohesion is low, a person experiences being *disengaged* -- a feeling of not being close to or connected with other family members. When cohesion is high, a person feels enmeshed. Personal lives are too intertwined and family members feel "stuck together" and smothered. A balance between separateness and togetherness is most functional across the family life cycle. The right balance allows family members to fully develop their potential as individuals. Two qualities related to family cohesion are: *commitment* and *spending time together*.

1. **Commitment** refers to a willingness to invest time and energy in family activities and not let careers/jobs or other priorities take too much time away from family interaction. Members care about each other and show it through words and deeds. Members are committed to promoting each other's growth, happiness, and welfare and agree to work out difficulties when hardships strike.
2. **Spending time together** refers to quality experiences the family engage in. This promotes the emotional bonding family members feel for each other. Strong families regularly schedule group activities. While this seems simple enough, in theory, in practice it is difficult. Members often give each other "left-over" time, and if an individual is "too tired," "too busy," or "everybody is doing their own thing," it is difficult to spend quality time together.

Family Flexibility

Family Flexibility is defined as the *ability to change its power structure, roles and rules* when needed. If a family is unwilling or unable to change, it becomes *rigid*. If leadership, authority and family rules are lacking, the family will become *chaotic*. When the family is *flexible*, leadership is more democratic and less authoritarian, and adults share equitably in the decision-making. Jobs are not based on age or gender and any person can fill in for another during a period of family hardship. Two qualities related

to family flexibility are: *the ability to cope with stress and crisis* and *spiritual well-being*.

3. **Coping with stress and crisis.** Strong families are not immune from stress and crisis. While they work to prevent major problems from occurring, the unavoidable hassles of daily life often produce stress and strain. Strong families meet these challenges constructively and do not fragment or disintegrate. They do not blame, criticize, or find fault with each other, but instead develop a *resiliency* -- the ability to "bounce back" from hardships and adversity. Such families efficiently use their resources to meet the demands of the crisis. They seek help from community resources when needed and attempt to learn more positive ways of coping.
4. **Spiritual well-being** refers to a feeling of wellness and wholeness of spirit. It is a feeling or force that helps people transcend themselves. Many gain this sense of well-being through regular practice of their religious faith. Such individuals talk about their faith in God or some higher power which sustains them through life's joys, hardships, and tragedies. Others express these feelings in terms of ethical values and commitment to important causes. Spiritual well-being is a caring center within each individual that promotes sharing, love, and compassion. Some describe their families in this manner: the love they feel for each other is sacred.

Family Communication

Family Communication is the major key in creating, supporting, maintaining, or destroying a family. It is the "facilitating dimension" which promotes an environment of self-esteem and support, or one of pain and blame. Ironically, many families don't spend much time talking to each other. Often, they lack the time, energy, or skill to listen and talk for greater understanding. The family may not be an open, safe environment in which people are encouraged to express their feelings and ideas and many topics may be taboo. Two characteristics strongly related to family communication are: *positive communication and appreciation and affection*.

5. **Positive communication** means family members talk and listen to each other in a non-critical, non-judgmental, and non-threatening manner. They "listen with their hearts as well as their ears." They can talk about what made them angry, sad, hurt, or pleased. Strong families do have conflicts and members do argue, but they take time to talk out their differences and share feelings to reach understanding. Strong families like to laugh and use humor to reduce tension, lessen anxiety, express warmth, and put people at ease.
6. **Appreciation and affection** are expressions of how family members show their feelings for each other. They say "Thank you," "Please," "I love you," and "You are important in my life," with both words and deeds. They intentionally give positive strokes and avoid negative ones. Each promotes the self-esteem of others and believe and act as if "I'm OK and You're OK." Positive, caring interaction can be learned and practiced on a daily basis. In the hurry of everyday responsibilities, it is easy to take each other for granted. A positive gesture, especially when unexpected, makes one feel special.

Other major factors revealed as important in creating strong, sustainable families include:

7. **Quality of the couple relationship.** In intact families, the quality of the couple relationship is crucial to the development of a strong, sustainable family. Happily married couples report better communication skills; are able to talk about their differences; are more realistic about their relationships and the problems and challenges they are going to have; have greater personality compatibility; and agree on and share important spiritual and cultural values and traditions. Families based on good marriages seem to survive and do well, no matter what stressors occur (from daily hassles to major hardships). The quality of the couple relationship sets the tone for the quality of the family environment. (For an assessment of the couple relationship and its potential, see Lingren, H., (1993) **Realizing Your Marriage Potential**, NCR 493, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
8. **Community involvement.** Strong, sustainable families give their time and talent to community activities and community affairs. They influence policy-making and legislation by participating in

several community and state organizations. They organize with other families to change policies and legislation. They help friends and neighbors, support schools and community groups, and use their own support networks in time of hardship. They do not withdraw and isolate themselves during difficult times.

- Management and decision-making.** Strong, sustainable families are both flexible and adaptable. Leadership within the family is more democratic and less authoritarian. People share responsibilities according to available time and competencies. They have regular family meetings, discuss family business together and learn effective management, decision-making, and negotiation skills. They sharpen their management skills and work together as a team to efficiently access and utilize resources. They learn to be good financial planners and managers.

Family Assessment

How well do these characteristics fit **your** family? The following questions will give you some idea about the strength and sustainability of your family. Rate your family on a scale of 1 to 5. (**1=almost never true, 2=occasionally true, 3=true about half the time, 4=often true, 5=almost always true**).

| | |
|--|--|
| | Our family enjoys being together, we have fun together and we do things together. |
| | Our family listens to each other and allows each person to express feelings and opinions without being criticized or put down. |
| | All family members express appreciation by saying "thank you," "please," "I like you." |
| | Our family supports each person's welfare and happiness and we are proud of each other. |
| | Our family shares a set of ethical principles and religious values and we participate regularly in spiritual growth and/or religious activities. |
| | Our family has many friends and we participate in school, youth, religious and community and civic organizations. |
| | Our family sticks together when a crisis strikes and we make good use of all available help. |
| | Our marriage is a satisfying partnership and we can talk about our differences and share important decisions together. |
| | We work together as a team and manage our resources and set priorities together as a family. |

Scoring:

37-45: Family sustainability is good in all areas. Keep working for greater enjoyment!

27-36: Doing well in many areas. May need extra effort in others.

17-26: Your family isn't reaching its potential! Work to make it the way you want it.

0-16: Your family life has been ignored. Don't let it die of neglect.

Sustainable Qualities of Diverse Ethnic and Cultural Groups

All families have strengths. Strong, sustainable families, whatever their ethnic identity or country of origin, share many, if not most, of the qualities previously identified. One study of family strengths (Abbott & Meredith, 1988) identified traits of strong families across five American groups: Caucasians, Native Americans, Hmong refugees from Southeast Asia; Hispanics and African Americans. *Table I* lists the top strengths according to each ethnic group. Each trait had to be considered important by at least half of the parents in at least one ethnic group.

As *Table I* reveals, all families value effective communication, being trusting and trustworthy, being affirmative and positive toward each other, teaching a sense of right and wrong, learning respect for others, respecting one's elders, feeling responsible for the family's welfare, and respecting the privacy of others.

Depending upon cultural background, some family types value certain traits more than others. There are, however, many similarities in what strong families value in themselves.

Table I. Family Strengths in Various Ethnic Groups

| | Native American | Hmong | Mexican American | African American | Caucasian |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| Family Trait | N = 57 | N = 80 | N = 105 | N = 103 | N = 210 |
| Communicates and listens | 60% | 81% | 86% | 67% | 88% |
| Trusting and trustworthy | 51% | 73% | 88% | 69% | 87% |
| Is affirming and supportive | 81% | 75% | 82% | 70% | 86% |
| Teaches a sense of right and wrong | 61% | 76% | 78% | 77% | 85% |
| Teaches respect for others | 74% | 41% | 85% | 58% | 73% |
| Shares leisure time | 23% | 41% | 51% | 41% | 67% |
| Is responsible for family welfare | 53% | 43% | 51% | 52% | 65% |
| Has a sense of play and humor | 37% | 18% | 35% | 55% | 58% |
| Respects privacy of family members | 39% | 56% | 72% | 57% | 57% |
| Shares religious beliefs | 32% | 15% | 32% | 30% | 56% |
| Has two parents living at home | 30% | 24% | 63% | 39% | 46% |
| Values family traditions | 35% | 73% | 45% | 38% | 41% |
| Financial security | 40% | 35% | 42% | 51% | 36% |
| Respects elders | 79% | 54% | 66% | 35% | 34% |
| Values a college education | 23% | 64% | 45% | 28% | 29% |

Other Suggestions For Creating Sustainable Families

Creating a strong, sustainable family is not easy. It demands time, energy, motivation, commitment, skill, and a willingness to persevere through difficulties. Here are some other recommendations to increase your family's sustainability:

1. The couple should have a "date night" each week or two, away from their children, so they continue to re-invent and revitalize their relationship.
2. Each parent or adult caregiver should spend regular, quality time alone with each child each week, doing something the child selects (with safety parameters of course).
3. Hold a weekly family council meeting so all members can be heard and wishes considered when family rules and decisions are made. People more readily accept family decisions when they are a part of making them.
4. Make a pact to give the family "prime time", not "left-over time."
5. Maintain good relationships with the extended family so they are an available resource to you and you with them.
6. It is never, ever, too late to begin to improve yourself or your relationship with others.

Sustainable Families as a Critical Resource

Problems either begin or end up in families. While the family can be an important causal factor in creating

problems, it can also be a very important curative factor. There is increasing evidence that families can either greatly facilitate or disrupt the recovery process from all types of emotional and physical problems ranging from child abuse to drug abuse, from sexual abuse to physical violence, and from juvenile delinquency to adult crime. They can include emotional problems like depression and suicide; physical symptoms like headaches, backaches, stomach aches; or more serious medical problems like heart disease and cancer.

Often, problem families produce more problem families. Unless the cycle is broken and necessary changes are made, family problems often repeat themselves and become more intense. Children not only learn dysfunctional patterns from their family of origin, but they also often carry them on in a more abusive and extreme way in their future relationships.

A sustainable family is a critical national resource. The home should be a place people feel comfortable and secure. The home base should provide the grounding needed to face the challenges and stressors of daily living.

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